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ABSTRACT

Education is presently undergoing a paradigm shift, with some teachers, parents, and administrators interested in new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, while others are skeptical or even resistant to new ideas in education. The Whole Language movement, and holistic education in general, is in danger of being tossed aside like the "New Math" of the 1960s. The current shift of paradigm in education can be described as a shift toward "meaning," the energy behind both growth and learning. The influence of the paradigm can be seen in the Whole Language and process writing movements, in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics' Standards, in hands-on science education, and in the multiple perspectives or meanings in the new social studies. School assessment and evaluation are also changing, with more emphasis on helping teachers and children in the classroom work together in the most productive ways possible. (MDM)

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Valuing Children: Authentic Assessment Based on Observation, Reflection and Documentation

(Talk given at the New England Kindergarten Conference, November 17, 1993)

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I want to try to create a framework to give the title of this talk some concrete meaning, a framework which will allow each of you to put the workshops you attend later this morning into a context of increased meaning. If this talk I'm about to give is successful--that is, if it makes sense to you as a description of the teaching/ learning/assessing process--then the content of the workshops should fit somewhere within this framework and help you to both understand and remember the more practical applications you will be hearing about.

It seems to me important for the health and future of the Whole Language Movement as well as of the related fields that one might call whole math, whole science, whole art, whole social studies--or, collectively, whole education--it seems important for their health and survival that practitioners develop some strong and basic theoretical understanding. If this doesn't happen, the whole enterprise will be on the endangered list. And we all recognize the signs of danger: when Whole Language is explained as "using big books to teach reading." When invented spelling is reduced to "letting children make mistakes in spelling" or when new math (and I'm not talking about the 'New Math" which a few of us are old enough to remember--with some pain) but about math based on the standards set forth a few years ago by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics--when this new math is explained as "the kind where the children get to play with blocks in first grade." In other words, when some of the superficial, highly visible earmarks of new theory & practice almost become the definitions of that theory and practice, well then we're on the edge of losing the whole enterprise.

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Basic shifts in paradigms--and I believe education is going through such a shift at present--(and I'll explain what I mean by a paradigm shift in a little while)-- basic shifts in paradigms--in beliefs and practices-- are difficult and sometimes painful because of the strength of habit and history, and the force of inertia. Some people are eager and interested in new ways of thinking about teaching and learning; more people are skeptical at best, and some even actively resistent. And these people include not only administrators, the public and the media but also teachers and most frequently, perhaps, parents. Parents because they have less direct access to new ideas in education and have less experience with them, tend to fall back on their own school experiences, in other words on the familiar and traditional.

Questions, somewhat loaded questions, are asked: like "How come you let him make all those mistakes in writing? Why I'm embarrassed to show his papers to his grandparents." Or "When I was in first grade, we weren't allowed to make spelling mistakes. We had to copy our papers over until they were perfect." It takes some explaining, some educating of parents--a good clear article can help, also simply talking and seeing can lead eventually to understanding. Above all, it takes time for most parents as well as for other people to accept new ideas and support teachers in unfamiliar practices.

So there are two main reasons why it seems to me important for teachers to develop a basic grasp of theory: first, as a self-correcting guide to practice--so you understand <u>why</u> youre doing what you're doing, and perhaps even be able to teach Whole Language with <u>small</u> -- even tiny books-- and be free to invent and improvise your own methods and materials. At a time when, at least in this state, teacher power seems to be on its way up, it is important that teachers seize the opportunity to be both knowledgeable, independent-minded and creative.

The second strong reason for teachers to develop some basic understanding of theory is for purposes of communication: to be able to explain your practice clearly and confidently to other teachers, administrators and parents.

Now the theory I'm going to be talking about this morning has to do with authentic assessment. (When I get to talking about what I mean by "paradigm," I'll also try to explain what I mean by "authentic." We hear these words so often we get used to them and sometimes never actually find out what they do mean and after a while it gets embarrassing to ask.)

The quote I'm about to read is from Documentation and Assessment of Student Progress, a Handbook of Strategies for Primary Teachers in the Cambridge Public Schools. This is a handbook developed over a period of about three years by a group of teachers, administrators and others in the Cambridge schools.

> "The responsibility of schools is to meet children wherever and whoever they are, provide them with equal access to the world of education and with the means to live up to their potential. The task of assessment is to assist teachers, schools, and school systems in fulfilling these responsibilities."

This sounds similar to many such statements. If it is really (and I mean really) taken seriously, however, it has strong implications for how we assess students' progress. I want to emphasize the words whoever they are: "meet children wherever and whoever they are". It is not the school's task to shape or form character. Children come to school with their characters pretty well formed--and, in any event, their characters belong to them, and are their private property. The school's task is rather to provide children with access to

education, in other words, to build with them bridges between the world of home and home culture to the world of school and school culture--whoever the children and whatever their backgrounds--and I realize, of course, that many of their backgrounds these days are unstable and troublesome.

Children should be able to cross those bridges between home and school as whole human beings, with their characters and sense of self intact. If for one reason or another, they leave a large piece of themselves at home, they come to school already somewhat weakened and are likely to become alienated, ineffectual learners. "Whoever a child is": includes physical appearance, ways of learning, past experiences, cast of mind, interests. I don't want to be misunderstood, however: I'm not talking of behavior as such--it goes without saying that disruptive behavior has to be controlled and children have to learn to live within the necessary (i.e. not arbitrary) expectations of the classroom. What I do mean is that children need to be respected for who they are rather than for what we want them to be.

This brings me to assessment--specifically portfolios or collections of children's work. But before I get into that, I want to be sure to clarify the two words I mentioned, paradigm and authentic. (I hope you weren't worried that I'd forget.)

First paradism: Mary S. Poplin, in a 1988 paper, distinguishes paradigm from theory: " The concept of paradigm is far more encompassing than that of theory...While theory directly delineates the phenomena of interest, a paradigm does not, but rather presents a world view, a 'way of seeing' which is also a way of not seeing."

The idea of "paradigm" was first elaborated by Thomas Kuhn in an important book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, published in the early sixties. Kuhn, who is explaining

scientific revolutions like those of Newton, Copernicus, and Einstein, writes "The historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places." (my emphasis and I of course am going to suggest specifically these two activities in terms of assessment--using new instruments and looking in new places.

One more example and then we'll let paradigms rest in peace: Janet Emig, writing in 1982, uses the term "governing gaze"-- to describe the fundamental character of a paradigm--a term I very much like. So "world view," "way of seeing" "governing gaze"--that influence not only how you understand a subject but the instruments you use and the places you look.

The current shift of paradigm in education can be described as a shift toward "meaning" -- meaning as the energy behind both growth and learning. And meaning is not transmitted from teacher to learner but must be constructed by the learners themselves. An individual finds meaning, a group or culture finds meaning--but you can't create my meaning or I create your's. Those of you who are familiar with the writings of Thomas Dewey, Jean Piaget, Eleanor Duckworth for instance will recognize their role among many others as contributors to the current paradigm.

The influence of the paradigm can be seen in the Whole Language and process writing movements, in National Council of Teachers of Mathematics Standards that I mentioned earlier, in "hands-on" science, in the multiple perspectives or meanings in the new social studies (Columbus now appearing to some groups as villain rather than hero). Personal meaning is stressed in all these areas of the curriculum. The arts, of course, can virtually be defined as the "creation of meaning." Only when children are given patterns or models

to copy does art lose its educational or meaning-making value.

None of this in fact is altogether new. Some of these ideas have been around for a couple of centuries. But they seem to me to have a pervasive presence now that constitutes a genuine paradigm shift.

Now on to "authentic." "Authentic" according to the dictionary means "worthy of trust, can be believed." Now that's good but I would also add that authentic implies something that is as it seems, something that is consistent all the way through, the inside consistent with the outside. An authentic gold piece, for instance, is one you can trust because it not only appears like gold but is gold. An authentic REmbrandt not only appears to be a work by Rembrandt but actually is one. Authentic behavior is when someone acts as he/she feels so you can trust him/her. In addition to insides and outsides, authenticity can also be seen as consistency in time--between what is happening now and what is meant to happen in the future. In current terminology, an action is authentic when aligned with its long-term purpose--when you can sight down the line towards the future and see the connection between what is happening here and what the end result is supposed to be.

In assessment, also, authenticity means that the results can be trusted partly because the methods line up with long-term, purposes. Authenticity can be contrasted, perhaps with expediency. The first is justified by a long view, the second by a short-term need.

To clarify this further, I'll use the example of learning to read. What, for example, is the purpose of reading, of the activity itself? I would say it is essentially to enjoy literature and make accessible a world of information and experience. It follows then, that authentic assessment should line up with these purposes so that the indicators along the way are

trustworthy. Appetite for reading in second grade, for example, is a trustworthy, authentic indicator of future literacy. Testing for recognition of short vowel sounds, on the other hand, which might be a necessary expedient under some circumstances, cannot be called "authentic" assessment; it is a deviation away from the straight line between learning to read and the real life purposes of reading. And, in fact, this kind of test can't be trusted: not only can we read perfectly well without ever having learned to recognize short vowel sounds out of context but, having learned to recognize them by no means ensures becoming a good reader.

School assessment and evaluation have more than one purpose and these purposes become confounded. Some purposes have to do with policy makers, administrators, tax payers and politicians and information that helps make decisions about school improvement, policy decisions, taxes, distribution of resources, etc. These are important purposes and have special requirements--including the difficult one of generalization which, in turn, means converting data into numbers. In order to compare achievement in 1983 to achievement in 1993 you probably need to have numbers. I'm not going to discuss these purposes here.

The kind of authentic assessment I'm talking about is meant to help teachers and children in the classroom work together in the most productive ways possible and to communicate effectively with parents. Here numbers don't necessarily help. Now I'm going to narrow down the subject further to collections of student work: The Cambridge Handbook I quoted from earlier sets forth a scheme for assessment: two parallel collections of data--one belongs to the teacher and one to the student. The teacher's collection includes things like curriculum notes, observations, reflections on individual students or on the classroom as a whole, notes on parent conferences, test results--whatever he or she is already in the habit of keeping.

The student collection, the portfolio, includes samplings of work from all areas of the curriculum. Both these collections, then, the student's and the teacher's inform the "student profile" or report that gets sent home to parents.

This brings me back, then, to both authenticity and bridges and between home and school. What are we looking at when we assess children's learning? First,.. and perhaps least of all, we look at skills--handwriting, word spacing, directionality in reading, number facts and so on. Second, we might also be interested in control over information--the kinds of dinosaurs that existed, the names of colors, the number of states in New England etc. Third, we are interested in higher level skills and understanding--of the metamorphosis of butterflies, of the electrical connections between batteries, wires and bulbs, of probability in math, why fire engines are painted red, why violence is not a rational solution to disagreements. Finally, and perhaps most important, we are interested in personal characteristics and habits of mind: curiosity, inventiveness, willingness to take risks, self-confidence, sociability, and so on. All these aspects of learning are, of course, in real life seamlessly woven together. It is also true, however, that I named four categories of learning in ascending order of importance. It is the first two, however, that are usually tested. Why?

Skills and information are easier to get at--because they can be tested out of context. Who is the president of the US? Bill Clinton. What does 2+2 equal? 4. What happens when you mix blue and yellow? Green. This is the kind of subject matter that lends itself to testing --but, incidentally, can also be picked up through portfolios. But what can't be tested is what is central to the whole learning process: learning characteristics and habits of mind. You can't, for example, test for curiosity because it needs a context--

curiosity about something. But as a characteristic, curiosity is of enormous importance to learning.

Now the last group I mentioned, habits of mind, are not always developmental or even school-acquired. They come with the child. And they either cross the bridge with him or her from home or, if not recognized, appreciated or allowed expression, they may soon be left behind, left outside the school entrance. For one reason or another, some children are tougher and more insistent on bringing who they are into the classroom. Others are more easily discouraged and often quite visibly lose character when they enter the school setting. (I'm not going to talk about those unfortunate children whose characters have already been assaulted in the home setting, children from all classes and backgrounds.)

Learning characteristics and habits of mind, although they can't be tested for, are evident in student portfolios. I have been looking at portfolios in several schools recently and have been aware of these vivid statements of self in many forms-- the child saying "This is me" "I'm here" "This is my hand you see the traces of, my perspective, my humor, my interest."

Some examples:

Bethann painted a picture, from life, of a bowl of daffodils. In her picture the daffodils were bright blue with purple leaves. When asked about the colors, Bethann said matter-of-factly that she liked them that way. (an assertion of taste)

Anton wrote a detailed, almost play-by-play dramatic story about a game between the Boston Celtics and New York Knicks---the handwriting getting more and more scrawly. Finally, on

page 3, he breaks off the account and addresses the reader directly: "It's too long so I will tell you who won. Boston won." (An assumption of the reader's interest in his, Anton's story, the reader's wanting to hear the ending)

Pencil drawings in Francisco's portfolio show his interest in all things electric or electronic--video games, radios, TV sets, refrigerators--all of which he draws skillfully and in detail. He also practices his drawing skill, covering pages with three-dimensional boxes and schematic stars. (A child bringing to school his preoccupation with drawing and his fascination with a particular subject matter)

Letter: Dear Editor, In one of your stories, "How Mom Saved the Planet," it says that everyone has a mom. But that is not true. You can have one dad, no mom, or two dads, no mom, or just a grandmother. etc. love, Eric (This was not actually written in school but makes use of new ability learned in school to write about his understanding of real life.)

Arthur's story: When paper got burnt I always used to think it was burnt butterflies. Sometimes when I smell fire, I think of Boston and foggy things. (Feelings, taking risks as always when write or talk about private feelings)

Book by Rachel, grade 1: I can pante, yes I can. I can clim a tree, yes I can. I can feed my dolls, yes I can. I can brayd my hair, yes I can. I can bild a bloc tawor, yes I can. I can help my mommy, yes I can. I can play with my frends, yes I can. I can go sleding, yes I can. I can go to bed all by myself. (Sense of self)

These are examples of children being themselves in school. Unfortunately I could give you examples of the opposite, children who are inexpressive in school and save their energy for

their portfolios which are not particularly interesting, not particularly fun to read.

These characteristics and habits of mind of the learner, although not always developed in school, nonetheless should be sustained in school -- curiosity, confidence, and imagination need to be recognized, valued and given opportunity for expression. They are the sources of energy not only for school learning but for lifelong learning. They are also characteristics that most children bring with them when they enter kindergarten and in school are are most likely to be supported in kindergarten settings--where the room is full of materials and opportunities for expression of self.

Deborah Meier, the prominent educator and founder of Central Park East Elementary and Central Park East Secondary Schools in New York City has said that kindergarten should provide the model for education throughout the grades--I think she was referring to how young children are encouraged to explore, create and learn all at one time; that education should be an opportunity, not an imposition--which is what it often becomes as children move into the early and middle grades. Motivation to learn should come from the child's own curiosity, drive to explore, to understand, connect with and exert a degree of control over the culture of the school-- school being a stand-in for the culture of the world at large. In other words, as the school culture is authentic.

Portfolios can capture and reveal these aspects of personal meaning. If the portfolios are passed on from Kindergarten to first grade to second grade and on up, they will help children have confidence in who they are, keep a sense of identity --which is a prerequesite for becoming effective learners in school. Teachers reviewing these portfolios with children will find, in Kuhn's words, that they, the teachers, are using "new instruments and looking in new places." The new instruments, of course, are the portfolios themselves. The new

places are the active, creative, energetic, imaginative, constructive and meaning-making minds of children.